

## INTERPRETING THE EXODUS AMONG THE NGONI PEOPLE

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### Abstract

*The interpretation of the Ngoni of Exodus 14:21-31 makes a comparison with the Israelites possible. Both the Israelites and the Ngoni crossed an expanse of water to reach their new land; The Israelites crossed the Red Sea and the Ngoni crossed the Zambezi River.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, just as God provided the Israelites passage by facilitating the crossing of the Red Sea on dry land in a miraculous way, the Ngoni were aided by the locals, the Chikunda people, by carrying them in their canoes to cross the river. The Egyptians perished in the sea; the Ngoni killed the Chikunda after being aided by them. The role of the King is also mentioned; in the biblical story Moses plays a significant role as the agent of God. In a similar manner, King Zwangendaba's role is highlighted in the entire episode. These narratives of origin and migration (both Biblical and Ngoni) are important for the formation of identity amongst the Ngoni in Zambia.*

**Key Words:** Exodus, Interpretation of Bible, Ngoni, Ten Commandments

### Christianity among the Ngoni

Christianity was introduced to the Ngoni land around 1900 through the Dutch Reformed Church Missionaries of the Orange Free State in South Africa. The first mission station amongst the Ngoni people, Madzimoyo, was established in 1903 (Cronje 1982:135-136). This was at the invitation of the Ngoni chief, Mpezeni. Thereafter, Christianity spread rapidly in the Ngoni land and their neighbouring tribes; by 1979 a number of mission stations were established by the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed Church, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Anglican Church (Lukhero 1992:19-20). The Ngoni land is one of the most Christianised areas in Eastern Zambia. This explains as to why most respondents do own a Bible or a family member has a Bible which is at their disposal. In addition, some have access to the Bible at their own Churches (see Table 1).

We have indicated above that the Ngoni language with a Zulu accent is no longer spoken today in every day communication – in its place a hybrid language, referred to as ChiNgoni which incorporates other languages of the Eastern Province of Zambia, is used.

Moreover, when Christianity was introduced to the Ngoni land, the early Evangelists and Missionaries used a Chewa language translation Bible later known as the ChiNyanja Bible. The most frequently used Bible translation has been the Revised Standard Version (RSV) which was translated into the Chewa language in 1922. The use of this version of the Bible is due to the fact that the early missionaries who came to evangelise the Ngoni

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<sup>1</sup> The crossing of the Zambezi by the Ngoni at Zumbo has been well documented in many written sources on the Ngoni. A precise date is given: 19 December 1835 and at that time there was an eclipse of the sun.

land in Zambia, came from Malawi where Chewa was the main language spoken. Initially, it meant that for one to be a Christian, one had to learn this 'language of the church' to be able to read the Bible. In fact, earlier literacy classes were conducted using the Chewa Bible as the basis of instruction. Most literate adults at that stage had to read the Bible before any other literature.

We need to mention that it has also been pointed out that the use of the Chewa language in the Church could also have been political and strategic for the missionaries. Most of the missionaries arrived during the same period the British colonialists were establishing themselves in North Eastern Zambia. This later led to the British clashing with the Ngoni people on several occasions. As a result the Ngoni people were always treated with some suspicion due to their militant way of life. Therefore, to subdue them strategically, it was imperative that their identity be erased or distorted. To achieve this, various approaches were adopted; one of them was the ban on the use of the Ngoni language at official Church level<sup>2</sup>. The Chewa people who were defeated by the Ngoni were made to feel superior over the Ngoni when their language was adopted as the official language of the Church. A similar pattern could be discerned elsewhere where the Ngoni settled. Kishindo (2002:214) writes that there is a saying in Malawi that the Ngoni defeated the Tumbuka, but the Tumbuka defeated the Ngoni language. This saying is echoed in reference to the demise of the Ngoni language and use of Tumbuka in everyday communication.

The other argument is that the Chewa language was dominant in Malawi (even to the present day). This also meant that in the missionaries' minds, the dominance of the Chewa language could be exported to Zambia with few problems. Therefore, instead of learning another language in which to operate in, missionaries choose to use a language they were already familiar with to facilitate for effective operation. In addition, most of their workers (helpers and Evangelists) were from Malawi and spoke the Chewa language.

The British colonialists also used other means to subdue the language and some elements of the Ngoni identity. For example, they banned *Ngoma* dance (a warrior dance of the Ngoni) because they felt that the dance would motivate the Ngoni to sustain their militant way of life.

### Interpretation of the Bible among the Ngoni

The research also wanted to establish the level of access to the Bible by the respondents and also which version of the Bible respondents used most. This was important because it has implications regarding the interpretation of the Bible.

**Table 1**

*Bible ownership among the respondents*

Own a Bible	Do not own or have access to a Bible	A family member owns a Bible	Read the Bible from Church	Total
100	10	40	10	160

<sup>2</sup> The church at this early stage was the forum through which formal education was provided. During this time a number of schools were established based on tribes such as the Angoni School. We need to state here that even with the establishment of the Angoni School; education was provided through the Chewa or Chi Nyanja language medium thereby sidelining the Ngoni language.

We have pointed out above that the Ngoni land is one of the areas that has a major Christian presence in the Eastern Province of Zambia. This is evidenced from the respondents' answers (Table 1) in which most of them (160) indicated that they had access to the Bible.

It was discovered that 100 of these respondents actually owned their own Bibles. The reasons for this were varied, but one of the major ones was that most churches in the area, specifically the Reformed Church in Zambia, required that all converts who passed through the catechumen classes needed to own at least a Bible among other literature such as a *Catechism* book or Hymn book. This was also the requirement for baptism. In addition, the catechumen classes required the members to memorise texts from the Bible and lessons from the Catechism book. This stance could have helped to account for a large number of people owning a Bible of their own.

The study findings also noted that there were a significant number of respondents (40) who indicated that a family member owned a Bible to which they had access. There were not also a small number of the respondents (10) who did not own a Bible nor had family members who had Bibles, but were able to have access to the Bible at their respective churches or congregations. This trend was more apparent in respondents who attended catechumen classes where they read the Bibles and left them at the church. In some instances (10) congregations had Bibles (pew Bibles) which congregants who attended the Church services would have access to – more especially in the urban areas.

Only a small number of respondents (10) indicated that they did not own a Bible nor had no access to the Bible through their family members.

We need to state here that the Bible had for long been translated into Malawian Chewa, though later on it was translated into a language known as chiNyanja. This is a term that is used to refer to a hybrid language which combines some elements of a number of Eastern Province languages; Chewa, Ngoni, Tumbuka, Nsenga and Kunda. This is currently the language in which the Bible is mostly translated. The language chiNyanja has also been in use in Malawi to refer to a hybrid language that consists of a number of languages around Lake Malawi (Nyanja).

**Table 2**

*Bible version read and/or listened to most*

ChiNyanja version	English Version	Other language version	Total
135	20	5	160

The respondents were also asked to comment on the Bible version which they used and/or most listened to. The table above (Table 2) demonstrates that the Ngoni have access to a number of Bible versions; however, the majority of them (135) indicated that they had access to the ChiNyanja Bible version while a significant number indicated that they read mostly an English version Bible. However, a few respondents indicated that they also read the Bible in other language versions such as Bemba, Nsenga or Tumbuka. There has never been an Ngoni translation of the Bible to the knowledge of the respondents in the research.

The research findings further indicated that there is a difference in the language used in the text (translation) than what is used in everyday communication. Most respondents own a ChiNyanja Bible version (Table 2). This is the Bible version they use and mostly listen to. For example, during the service, one would read the text in ChiNyanja translation and

preach either in Ngoni or Tumbuka. The implication of such a scenario is that sometimes the meaning of the text is negotiated within the worldview of the translator's language at the expense of the reader's worldview. While it can be argued that meaning is with people, the consequences of such a scenario are that the Ngoni have to first think in ChiNyanja or Chewa language and later on in the Ngoni language. As a result, in doing so, they are influenced by the Chewa language, culture and worldview of the translation. While one is able to enlarge one's worldview by being in contact with other worldviews, the fact is that any language operates in a cultural environment which perpetuates its survival. In other words, it is vital for the reader to read and reflect on the text in his/her own language if one has to have a meaningful interpretation of the text. This is so – as pointed out above, language is more than a communicative tool. The fact that the Ngoni language continues to operate in moribund manner, cannot warrant the rich appreciation of the text.

Therefore, the interpretation of the book of Exodus among the Ngoni is negotiated amongst the competing two worldviews; that of Chewa or ChiNyanja in which the Bible text is written and that of Zambian Ngoni in which everyday communication is done. Whilst the origins of the Chewa people are not known as they are believed to have been in the area for a very long time, they have somehow become part of the Ngoni neighbourhood influencing the way the latter view themselves. This is despite the fact that the Chewa traditions are different from that of the Ngoni. It needs to be pointed out here that Chewa or chiNyanja, being the language of the Church, has not influenced the Ngoni to embrace the Chewa view of the environment, cosmology and/or cosmogonies among other things. The reason may be due to the fact that the Chewa or Nyanja worldview projected by the early missionaries to the Ngoni land had already been influenced by Christianity by the time they arrived in the Ngoni land.

### **Interpretation of the Exodus Texts among the Ngoni**

#### *Interpretation of Exodus 14:21-22*

##### *Exodus 14:21-22 – Background*

This passage mentions the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites pursued by the Egyptians. It is part of the periscope that runs through from v. 21 to 31. The descriptions of the events (Exodus 14:21-22) start by indicating that:

*V.21: Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided,*

*V.22: and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.*

The passage describes how God miraculously saves the Israelites from the pursuit of the Egyptians. As their pursuers were following them, the Israelites were terrified that the mighty army of the Pharaohs would overcome them. This is why Moses give the Israelites the assurance, 'the Lord would fight for you (Exodus 14:14).

In the narrator's mind, the Israelites were able to cross the sea with the help of God. The passage actually wishes to demonstrate the great power of God over the Pharaohs' might. It is clear from the passage that "Moses is the wonder worker (P), in J, Yahweh works directly to drive the sea back by an east wind (Hyatt 1983:153)". This is despite the fact that Moses plays a leading role in the miraculous crossing that later evolves.

*Exodus 14:21-22 among the Ngoni*

The Ngoni people on their way from South Africa travelled through several countries in the region, occasionally fighting their way onwards. In this migration history of the Ngoni, the most dramatic event was the crossing of the Zambezi River. This river starts from North Western Zambia and passes through Zimbabwe and Mozambique where it flows into the Indian Ocean. At a place, called Zumbo, there is the confluence of the Luangwa and the Zambezi rivers; at this place three countries; Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique share boundaries. Zumbo is significant to the Ngoni as it is the place where they crossed the Zambezi River from the South to travel up North and eventually settle down in Eastern Zambia after travelling to Tanzania.

The Ngoni people make a number of comparisons of this part of Biblical narrative with their own narratives of origins. During the research, using a comparison method at basic level, some respondents gave this interpretation:

Firstly, there is a comparison made by the Ngoni on the challenges faced by the Israelites in crossing the Red Sea under pursuit of the Egyptians. Just as the Israelites had to cross the Red Sea to reach their new found land, the Ngoni had a similar situation or challenge – they had to cross the Zambezi River to get to the new land. The notable comparison was made in the manner in which the Israelites crossed the river. We are told in the Biblical passage (Exodus. 14:21) that Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and in a miraculous way the water was separated which facilitated the easy crossing of the sea by the Israelites. In this Biblical story it is clearly indicated that the power behind the miraculous crossing of the Red sea was God. The narrator aptly puts it “all that night the LORD drove the sea back (Exodus 14:21)” – despite the fact that Moses is the leader that motivates and leads the people out of Egypt unto the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. In a similar manner, the Ngoni crossed the Zambezi River in miraculous fashion. There are many stories told associated to how the Ngoni actually crossed the Zambezi River as stated above. One of these stories told is that the local people of that area, the Chikunda who were more familiar with water since they lived by the riverside helped the Ngoni to cross the river by carrying them in their canoes. Clearly, in most people’s minds there was an external hand in the miraculous manner which the Ngoni crossed the Zambezi River. This is in comparison with the manner which the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. God facilitated the Israelites to cross the sea on dry land (Exodus 14:22). There is often no argument on means of crossing the Zambezi River, but the outcome of the event. The fact the Ngoni crossed the river in November (usually the rainy season) when the water levels are significantly high points to a miracle.

The second comparison with the passage (Exodus 14:21-22) made by the Ngoni is on what actually transpired after the Israelites had miraculously crossed the sea. We are told in the Biblical passage that when the expanse of the water was separated in miraculous manner, the Israelites walked on dry ground to the other side of the sea. Moreover, when all the Israelites had crossed the sea, the Egyptians who were pursuing them followed in hot pursuit. However, when they reached the middle, confusion followed in their ranks and all the Egyptians who had followed the Israelites into the sea perished when the separated waters rolled back and drowned them (Exodus 14:24) thereby clearly indicating that God was fighting for the Israelites (Exodus 14:25). The Ngoni interpretation shows similar characteristics. In a similar manner in which the Egyptians perished in the waters of the Red Sea, the local people, the Chikunda, who had aided the Ngoni in crossing the Zambezi by ferrying them across the mighty waters in their canoes, were killed by the Ngoni after they had safely been taken across the Zambezi.

The third and last comparison made with the text is that of the role of Moses as leader of the Israelites in the crossing of the Red Sea. Moses played a significant role as the agent of God. It was through Moses that God helped the Israelites to cross the Red Sea. In the Ngoni story, King Zwangendaba's role was similarly significant; he was the one who gave the Ngoni the motivation and leadership in the process. It is assumed by the Ngoni that their King Zwangendaba could have received inspiration from God.

### *Interpretation of Exodus 19:10-20*

#### *Exodus 19:10-20 – Background*

The passage describes the events at Mt Sinai preceding the giving of the law. Moses goes up the mountain to meet God and when he descends he instructs the people to concentrate themselves because God was to appear before them. They had to cleanse themselves and one of the acts of the cleansing process was to abstain from sex as indicated in the passage:

v. 10: *And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes".*

The passage clearly demonstrates that the Israelites had to consecrate themselves before they met God. The four commands of God to Moses were clear. He had to go to the people and instruct them to sanctify themselves for two days. Moreover, they had to wash themselves and be prepared to meet God. There were also two additional commands besides the purification rituals; these commands to Moses were: (1). Set boundaries for the people v.12 (2) set instruction v.13 (Dozeman 1989:23).

We need to point out that various reasons could be advanced for this act. But clearly, one of them could be to make them understand the solemn nature and the seriousness of the covenant they were to make with God. In addition, this was to instil in them a sense of responsibility and appreciate the natural holy nature of God.

#### *Exodus 19:10-20 among the Ngoni*

The comparison among the Ngoni of this passage is based on the basis of the act itself. It is a well-known phenomenon to consecrate oneself before a big event. Whilst there is no holy mountain similar to Mount Sinai among the Ngoni where they meet God, the aspect of consecrating oneself is done in various ways and places.

For example, there are a number of rituals done before meeting God (through the ancestors). A familiar one is the annual ceremony (*Nc'wala*). During this ceremony, the Ngoni people come before God to pray and offer sacrifices for the good harvest and sustenance in the previous year. The leader (paramount Chief) goes into seclusion a day before the ceremony. On the day of the ceremony, a bull is slaughtered and the chief drinks blood and eats meat roasted from the beast.

The rationale behind the act of consecrating oneself is the need to be clean or holy. The understanding is that when one has to undertake a major event, one needs to abstain from all activities deemed capable of making one unholy, such as sex.

We need to note here that whilst the Biblical story indicates that there is consecration of the whole populace before this national event, in the Ngoni case only the Chief has to be consecrated during the *Nc'wala* ceremony. However, among the Ngoni, there is also a general tendency to consecrate oneself before any big event, for example, war (in the past) or during a hunting expedition. During this consecration everyone was expected to abstain from sex.

The aspect of consecrating oneself is also done in some instances before the Holy Communion Service. In the Reformed Church in Zambia, before any Holy Communion Service which is held on a Sunday, there is a Preparation Service for the Holy Communion on Saturday. The congregants are expected to prepare for the service by making themselves ready to receive the Holy Communion. To achieve this status, one needs not to do things that are considered as unholy. This may also include sex. The Holy Communion is seen as a way of making oneself Holy before God. The general understanding is that the Holy Communion Service is an occasion when one meets God – it is considered to have a potential of transformation. Consequently, some people have a belief that only those who approach the Holy Communion in a solemn manner obtain the results. We need to note here that this interpretation or understanding of the Holy Communion cannot be theologically substantiated. This is so because the Holy Communion is simply a fellowship meal in the real sense of the word – an occasion to celebrate Christ.

It is, however, expected that any consecration produces a state of purity that would result in a perfect outcome of a matter. For example, it is expected that when one consecrates oneself, a positive result would be achieved. In an instance of hunting, consecrating oneself (abstaining from sex) would end up in a huge and successful hunt.

However, no respondents were able to clearly state why abstaining from sex is considered as a form of consecrating oneself. It is a practice which many people have come to embrace without any convincing rationale.

In all this, the ideal of ritual cleanliness or holiness is propagated. Holiness in the context of the Ngoni, refers more to a status usually temporary for a specific period. It is achieved by abstaining, for example, from sex (*Kujigura*). Consequently, the biblical story in this text is understood comparatively in that context. God was holy, therefore, people have to be holy to meet Him.

### *Interpretation of Exodus 20:1-17*

#### *Significance of the Ten Commandments in Africa*

This passage describes the giving of the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel. In this passage, the commandments are elaborated on. This is because these commandments are read in Churches every Sunday and most respondents have memorised them, so much so that they know them by heart.

The status of the Ten Commandments has never been far from debate in the academia. It had been under the spotlight already in the first century most especially as regards its relevance to a particular time and context. There have been arguments whether the Commandments are necessary today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among the arguments advanced are that it was a constitution of the ancient Israel which ended at the cross (Col 2:14). The implication is that the Decalogue only lasted until Christ came (Gal 3:16-24). Moreover, many passages in the New Testament allude to the fact that the Ten Commandments were abolished with the Christ event (Hebrews 8:13) and that Jesus is our only way now (Rom 7:4; Heb 10:20).

However, in the Israelite community the law was essential. It had to do with the revelation of God. To know God is to know His will (Childs (1985:5). This knowledge of God is in his law. It is for this reason that Childs (1985:53) concludes that the fullest and most direct expression of the will of God in the Old Testament is found in the revelation of the law at Sinai. The Ten Commandments have a unique and significant place in the lives of Israelites as it is connected to the covenant.

It is imperative to mention here that the Ten Commandments have also a place in the hearts of many African Christians. The Decalogue is still read in most church services, more especially in the main line churches. The reasons are varied. Among these reasons are the following:

Firstly, Community life, harmony and good relationships in African society, is of paramount importance. Everyone belongs to the community and is part of its sustenance. In this vein, it is imperative that the community member does not do anything that jeopardises the community harmony. The community shapes the individual and it is in the community that the individual realises her/his potential (Ogbonnaya 1998:10). The success of the individual is the success of the community and vice versa. Oduyoye (1979:110) argues that “the concept of individual success or failure is secondary”. To maintain this harmony various efforts are made by the individual and community leaders to ensure that it is kept. In doing this a number of laws in form of proverbs, idioms and sayings evolve around the community as reminder of the need to sustain the community. In addition, culture practices i.e. ceremonies, passage of rites, enhance the society harmony. For this reason, to have norms or guidelines is not a strange phenomenon among the Africa community (Zulu 1999:33). In addition, the ready acceptance of the Ten Commandants has largely to do with their emphasis on the binding or rallying of the people together under one vision, namely God.

Secondly, the importance of family among African communities is a more complicated matter than the nuclear family in the Western mind. In Africa one person is not bigger than his family. Everyone has family and must belong to it, be attached to it at all times in order for one to benefit from its interconnectedness. Given this importance of the family anything that aims at sustenance of family is greatly appreciated. The Ten Commandments thrust is on family relations, for example, laws on adultery, covet, honouring of parents – all these are aimed at the enhancing of a good and strong family.

Thirdly, the religious environment in the African context is overwhelming. In all places there is a strong belief in the existence of the sacred. Consequently, everything is deemed religious from birth to grave and beyond – the religious rhythm continues to play continuously. All departments of life are permeated by religion (Mbiti 1990:2). This explains as to why all the major religions of the world would find space in an African mind. Therefore, any laws that are meant to keep this attachment to the supreme God are appreciated significantly.

Fourthly, the importance of obedience in this community, the laws guiding the social, cultural and religious lives of the Ngoni people is embodied in their myths, proverbs and the traditional courts. There are no written laws similar to the Ten Commandments, but through proverbs, idioms, the Ngoni are taught what is right and wrong. In addition, the structural arrangements of the household, the family where the father is head, the Village Headmen (*manduna*), Chiefs and the Paramount chief all issue decrees of conduct and see to it that the society is kept in harmony. In this context of regulating its ethos, the community is bound by its allegiance to the tribe and adherence to these laws (unwritten) without any dissent.

#### *The Ten Commandments and the Ngoni*

The study also needed to find out about how the Ngoni viewed and interpreted the Ten Commandments. A questionnaire and subsequent follow-up questions established that not all the Ten Commandments seemed to be relevant to the Ngoni. We need to point out here that by indicating that some commandments were not relevant does not in any way mean



that the commandments in particular are not important. The findings merely point to the fact that some commandments are easily understood and applied by the Ngoni community whilst others are difficult to apply in this community.

Therefore, when asked about which of the commandments was most relevant to the Ngoni tradition, many people indicated (**Table 4**), Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth commandments respectively – these were deemed to be more relevant to them. However, the Fifth commandment was the most outstanding followed by the Eighth and Tenth commandments respectively as demonstrated in the tabulated data below.

**Table 3**

*Commandments relevant to the Ngoni community and tradition*

Commandment	Most Relevant	Not relevant	Do not know	Total number of responses
First Commandment	20	90	40	160
Second Commandment	50	100	60	160
Third Commandment	60	20	80	160
Fourth Commandment	70	20	70	160
Fifth Commandment	140	20	0	160
Sixth Commandment	100	40	20	160
Seventh Commandment	100	40	20	160
Eighth Commandment	135	25	0	160
Ninth Commandment	90	10	60	160
Tenth Commandment	130	0	30	160

**Key**

**Most relevant:** Implies the commandment is easily applicable to the community

**Not relevant:** Implies that the commandment is not easily applicable in the community. It does not mean it is not important.

**Do not know:** This means the respondent had no definite answer to the question.

The commandments 1-4 were not very popular among most of the Ngoni respondents in the study. In trying to find an explanation as to why commandments 1-4 seemed not to be relevant to the Ngoni tradition and to establish why commandments 5, 8 and 10 are preferred with commandment 5 being dominant, a number of explanations were advanced.

The first reason advanced was that these commandments speak of the relationship with God that seems not to fit in the Ngoni worldview. It is often not envisaged in this worldview that the Ngoni can have a direct relationship with God. Any relationship with God is better understood as being done through intermediate figures (ancestors in this regard).

The second reason given by the respondents is that among the Ngoni people the aspect of ancestor worship has no office bearers, i.e. priests, diviners, such as other African tribes. The ancestral veneration is often done at family level. The Public worship is a national event done in a form of commemoration, e.g. the *Nc'wala* ceremony where the ancestors

are invoked. Therefore, the commandments which make mention of direct contact or direct worship with God cannot fit in this mind-frame.

The research further established that, the other commandments (6, 7, 8, 9 and 10) are relevant in terms of their emphasis on the need for good neighbourliness (*Kunkhariranabwino*). There is always an emphasis in this community that one needs to stay in harmony with one's neighbour – perhaps due to the connectedness often found in these communities (rural areas). This is in sharp contrast to the history of the Ngoni who had an aggressive attitude and very often did not live in peace with its neighbours. The change of attitude could be attributed to the great influence of Christianity in this community. For example, many Ngoni belong to a denomination, very often the one that is dominant in their rural area. This explains for example, as to why if one comes from an area that is dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, one will belong to that church whenever one goes to live. Even in cases where Ngoni people moved to the urban areas – in most instances they retained membership with the denomination they had belonged to in their rural home areas. However, we have had instances where some would change their denomination, mostly to the Pentecostal and charismatic churches.

The information below is an analysis of the commandments most cited by the respondents in the research as being relevant to them.

#### ▪ Interpretation of the Fifth commandment

##### Background

*Honour your father and mother; so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you (Exodus. 20:12).*

The law to honour parents is not peculiar to Israel alone. It is also believed to be structured according to the pattern of ancient Near East treaties between a monarch and a vassal state (Harman 1997:158). Within Ancient Near East to honour parents was one of the obligations of young adults (Meyers 1988:385). Family connections were important for the survival and prosperity of an individual. This is so because family structures provide support structures to the individual at all times of her/his existence.

The basic issue is the continuity of the covenant because parents were responsible for teaching their children concerning the covenant (Craigie 1976:158). It also further provided a solid family structure since the father/son relationship was analogous to the God/Israel relationship (Craigie 1976:158). Children should continue to honour their parents throughout their lives. The commandment emphasises the family as God's design, as well as an extended metaphor that God uses for his relationship with his creation. The obligation to honour one's parents is owed to God.

The rationale for this commandment might have been to prevent the neglect of the elderly. It imposes the care for the elderly who are no longer productive (Prov 19:26; 30:17; Lev 19:3; Ecclesiastes 3:16). Ellison (1982) urges that the commandment is far from being as many think today, namely a mere reflection of earlier social conditions. We need to indicate that the commandment also implies that the mother should be honoured equally with the father. Honouring one's parents serves as a metaphor for the covenant between God and Israel (Deut. 32:19, Isaiah 1:20.)

The interpretation of this commandment among the Ngoni is done at a basic level. The law is actually taken literally to mean that children have an obligation to honour their parents. The verb used in the Nyanja translation, '*uzilemekela*' denotes three common words in this community which means: *respect*, *honour* and *worship*. This verb is also applied equally to both mother and father. Despite the Ngoni being patriarchal (where males dominate over females), this translation has been accepted and by implication places both sexes on par in terms of homage due to them. This might be due to the influence of the Chewa and/or Nsenga cultures which are matrilineal. The bottom line however, is the fact that parents are important and deserve all the honour. It was clear among the respondents that when they speak of the honouring of parents, they meant physical respect demonstrated in word and in practice. For example: literary providing for the parents, taking their advice or bowing to them.

The role of a parent is significant in a number of ways among the Ngoni people of Eastern Zambia:

Firstly, Genealogy and identity are important among these people. This is so because a parent links someone to the family and lineage. It is only through one's parents that one belongs and fits into this community. One therefore needs to be connected to one's family to continue to be part and parcel of the community. Everyone among the Ngoni belong to a lineage of some kind. There is no one who is not connected. This connectedness is strengthened through strong family ties.

Secondly, family property and land are transferred through these family lines. One's parent is a conduit to the inheritance of these properties. To belong to a family therefore guarantees one land ownership and security.

Thirdly, the issue of blessing and/or curse is significant in this context. This is so because there is a general belief that parents are the source of blessings and/or curse. One needs the blessings of the parents in order to succeed in life.

#### ■ Interpretation of the Eighth commandment

##### *Background*

*You shall not steal... (Exodus 20:15, Deuteronomy 5:19).*

The commandment originally prohibited the theft of a person as such. It is thought that in Ancient Near East persons were stolen to be taken up as slaves (Herlots 1958:133). However, the commandment includes all acts of misappropriation (Childs 1985:81). Moreover, the commandment came to be viewed exclusively in terms of sacredness of property and possessions and the right to privacy. Spong (1977:96) argues that in its simplest level the commandment says: "You shall not take what is not yours". Stealing is a sin against God for it accuses him of not giving enough. Secondly, it is a sin against love for it is the denial of loving one's neighbour (Ellison 1982:114).

Consequences of stealing in the Old Testament are clear; the penalty for stealing was stiff. If someone stole and killed a sheep and then sold the meat, this offender would be sold to pay the debt. If an animal was recovered alive, the thief had to repay pack double (Exodus 22:1-4). In addition, Proverbs 6:30-31 indicates that that which is stolen must be restored sevenfold. If a thing is taken fraudulently from anyone, it must be repaid in full plus one fifth of its value.

*Interpretation of the Eighth commandment among the Ngoni*

The interpretation of this commandment in this community takes into account a number of factors:

Firstly, there are always perimeters in which stealing is defined in an African context. In most instances stealing is determined by the motive rather than the act itself. If one takes something from something because one is hungry, it may be justified in the eyes of the community. It is only when one takes too much that he deprives others of the similar benefit and that is when it is considered stealing. For example, it is common for young children to take eggs from the family chicken run without permission (stealing) to eat. In addition, it has been generally accepted that one may help himself in the field of someone, let us say with sugarcane, more especially if one knows the owner. The general accepted norm is that one needs to eat it in that field and not carry extra to take away. When this happens, one has stolen. However, some respondents were of the view that in this day and age it is not acceptable to enter anyone's field without permission nor to take anything that is not yours as it is tantamount to stealing.

Secondly, the consequences of stealing in African society have been punished severely. One can either be banished from one's community or made to pay restitution as a form of punishment.

Thirdly, in most African communities such as the Ngoni, honour and shame<sup>3</sup> virtue influences the way one is defined. The status of an individual is related to what the community perceives of that individual to be. If for example, an individual is associated with stealing, his status is that of a thief which is a shameful. Therefore, it is imperative that everyone strives to be associated with the respectable status. This explains why to belong to the family that is associated with a vice such as stealing is shameful and least desirable. For this reason, as children are growing up, they are taught to distinguish between what is legitimately acquired goods (*vintuvako*) and the stolen ones (*voyiba*), and each family ensures that their children respect their neighbours' property (*vabene or vabenekazi*). Honesty is a virtue that is at all times inculcated in the children's minds.

It is necessary to point out that most of the respondents were not able to distinguish grammatical aspects of the commandments. But what was clear in their minds is that stealing is not only bad, but it also negatively affects one's credibility and standing in the community.

- Interpretation of the Tenth commandment

*Background*

The Tenth commandment reads:

*You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour (Exodus 20:17).*

This commandment differs from the other prohibitions in that it is directed at the impulse to violate another person's rights, rather than against the actual violation (Pixley

<sup>3</sup> "Honour means a person's (or group's) feeling of selfworth and the public, social acknowledgement of that worth. It is the basis of one's reputation of one's social standing, regardless of sex and the shameless person is the one with a dishonourable reputation beyond all social doubt; one outside the boundaries of acceptable moral life, hence one must be denied the normal social courtesies (Malina 1983:44).

1983:138). There is always discussions as to what is meant by the term *covet* or *covetousness* in Biblical scholarship; the background outline here does not go that far, but takes the view that the emphasis of the commandment does not first of all fall 'upon the deed done but upon the disposition of the self in the direction of the deed' (Harrelson 1080:148).

#### *Interpretation of the Tenth Commandment among the Ngoni*

The Nyanja Bible uses a verb '*usasirire*' which could be interpreted literally as envy in the sense of wanting the item that does not belong to you. It also denotes a malicious desire to get something that belongs to other people, a sense of jealousy so to speak. This would then in turn lead to someone employing underhand methods to acquire the things that one desires.

We need to point out also that among the respondents there was actually no problem in the ordering of the words in Exodus 20:17 and the parallel in Deuteronomy (5:21); wife comes second and house first in Exodus text while the Deuteronomy text lists the wife first and the house second. There are also differences in the verbs used.

The discussions among the respondents indicated that envy in a positive way is never considered as being bad or sinful. A person could admire, in a sense of getting motivated and encouraged by the manner in which for example one administers one's household; house, wife, workers or flock. However, what is discouraged and considered evil is the sense of being so envious that one wants to acquire by all means something that does not belong to him or her. It is custom for children growing up to be told, "Look at how that household is managed; care of the wife, children, workers or flock", as an example of how one is supposed to care for one's own household.

#### **Summary**

The Ngoni land is one of the most Christianised areas in the Eastern province of Zambia. Christianity was introduced to this area in the 1900s through the Missionaries of the Dutch Reformed Church of the Free State province in South Africa. These missionaries came through Malawi and used a chiNyanja or Chewa language which later became the official church language even in the Ngoni Church. The reasons could have being strategic, but political reasons could not be ruled out as argued above.

This research also established that most respondents have access to the Bible in a number of ways. Some respondents own their own Bibles whilst others access the Bible either through family members or through the Church (pew Bibles). In addition, most respondents read the Bible in chiNyanja or Chewa and other languages – there has never been a Ngoni translation of the Bible. Moreover, in the interpretation of Bible passages, the respondents use a comparison method at basic levels to look at parallels of the Biblical narratives compared to their own narratives (and context).

The interpretation of the Ngoni of the first passage, Exodus 14:21-31) makes a comparison with the Israelites in various ways as illustrated above. Both Israelites and the Ngoni crossed an expanse of water to reach their new land; The Israelites crossed the Red Sea and the Ngoni crossed the Zambezi River.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, just as God provided the Israelites passage by facilitating the crossing of the Red Sea on dry land in a miraculous way, the Ngoni were aided by the locals; the Chikunda people, who ferried them across in

<sup>4</sup> The crossing of the Zambezi by the Ngoni at Zumbo has been well documented in many written sources on the Ngoni. A precise date is given as 19 December 1835 and at that time there was an eclipse of the sun.

their canoes. The Egyptians perished in the sea; the Ngoni killed the Chikunda after the latter had aided them. The role of the King is also mentioned – in the biblical story Moses plays a significant role as the agent of God. In a similar manner, King Zwangendaba's role is highlighted in the entire episode.

The general picture that emerges from the interpretation of Exodus 14:21-31 is the view that indicates that God is in charge overall, including nature and that he fends for his people. It was clear to us that the reference to God among the Ngoni is simultaneously used to refer to ancestors as well. This is due to the fact that when the Ngoni speak of God there is no clear distinction made between God and ancestors. Given the fact that God reveals himself through intermediaries, the reference to God in the actions of their King Zwangendaba points to the work of the ancestors. Moreover, this interpretation may point to the influence of Christianity among the Ngoni.

The second passage (Exodus 19:10-20) under discussion deals with the episode before the giving of the Ten Commandments in which the Israelites are told to abstain themselves probably to make them understand the solemn nature and seriousness of the covenant they were to make with God – they were also to appreciate his holy nature.

The Ngoni interpretation of the passage clearly demonstrated that the aspect of consecrating oneself was a well-known phenomenon. It is expected that before any big event one has to consecrate oneself. The rationale behind the act is to make one holy and holiness in this regard is understood as a physical, temporary status attained for a specific time and event. The question as to why consecrating oneself involves also abstinence from sex was not satisfactorily answered by the respondents.

The Ten Commandments have also been widely read among the Ngoni and interpreted in the context of the Ngoni traditions.

The fifth commandment is significant in that it connects one with the family. Given this fact, it had a great appeal among most respondents. In most discussions and follow-up questions, the fifth commandment stood out as the most relevant to this context. The issue of honouring one's parents among the Ngoni was understood basically as to mean – in literal sense – paying homage to one's parents. The verb from the ChiNyanja Bible denotes three aspects; respect, honour and worship. The most significant aspect of this interpretation as noted above was that the commandment was applied equally to both parents; male and female. This is despite the Ngoni being patrilineal. As alluded to above, this may be due to the influence of the local people, Chewa or Nsenga, who are matrilineal.

The eighth commandment deals with the aspect of prohibition of stealing. Due to the fact that most African communities (and the Ngoni) have a high regard for reputation and status among themselves, the Ngoni have applied the commandment in their midst without any problem. The interpretation emanates from the desire to have a good name, deriving from the virtue of honour and shame. Every person in this community wishes to be associated with good; therefore, it was not strange when many respondents indicated that this commandment was most relevant as it clearly wishes to define what is yours and not yours. Moreover, it explains also why punishment is meted out severely in cases of one failing to uphold the law.

The interpretation of the Tenth commandment centres around how one relates to your neighbour and the basic interpretation most respondents showed was that what belongs to your neighbour is not yours – though one would admire, this is done in a positive manner. The admiration needs to lead to a motivation to do better than to destroy what your neighbour owns or has acquired.

The three passages analysed indicate the fact that the Ngoni view of the Exodus passages is basic and related to how they live. It is clear from the research that Christianity has played a significant role to influence the way these passages are understood and interpreted. In addition, it was also evident that the local cultures of the indigenous people such as the Chewa and/or Nsenga have greatly influenced their understanding of God. It was also unique that the Chewa cosmology and cosmogonies have not been embraced by the Ngoni. This may be due to the fact that the Chewa worldview projected by the early missionaries in the land of the Ngoni was already influenced by Christianity.

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